

BASIC GUIDELINES FOR STEPFAMILIES

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While much might have been learned from a first marriage that has ended in divorce, it is important to recognize that many of the same pitfalls of first marriages arise in subsequent marriages. In addition, further complications exist when there are dependent children from a first marriage of one or both of the marital partners. Continued interaction with the other parent on parenting issues can be an ongoing stressor, and few people have had any real preparation for their new role with a stepfamily. At best, adjustment to becoming a part of a stepfamily is a difficult process for all concerned—natural parent, stepparent, and stepchildren.

In addition to the actual adjustment problems encountered by the new stepfamily, everyone concerned may be influenced by the negative images of stepparents as wicked, selfish people which have been created in fairy tales such as “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” and “Hansel and Gretel.” These negative stereotypes of the “wicked stepmother” and the “unwanted stepchild” often cause discomfort and/or suspicion in stepfamilies even when there is no objective basis for these feelings. Unfortunately, no fairy tales exist in which there are kind, loving stepparents who enjoy their stepchildren.

A great deal of pain can be avoided within the stepfamily through developing an understanding of some of the common problems of stepfamilies and observing a few basic guidelines. Many of these guidelines are relevant to single divorced parents as well as to those who are members of a stepfamily. The following stepfamily guidelines have been developed to facilitate adjustment within the stepfamily, but they should not be regarded as an all-inclusive source of information about stepfamilies. A number of excellent books about stepfamilies are included in the “Selected Bibliography,” and are recommended reading for those who wish to learn more about stepfamilies after reviewing these basic stepfamily guidelines. It also should be noted that these stepfamily guidelines do not contain information about childrearing *in general*. There is a wide body of literature available to those who wish to learn more about the general principles of childrearing.

Since the seeds for many stepfamily problems are sown in the interim between divorce and remarriage, the first section of the guidelines addresses this period.

GUIDELINES BETWEEN DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

1. If you begin dating soon after your divorce, rather than having your dates come to your home, arrange to meet them some-where unless your children are with their other parent. It also is advisable to give dates your telephone number at

work rather than your home telephone number if your children are living with you. Usually children need from six months to a year to adjust to their parents' divorce and all of the attendant changes in their lives before it is advisable for them to have personal contact with people their parents are dating. Until then, it is better simply to tell your children that you are going to dinner (to a play, to a concert, etc.) with a friend if they are in the home when you leave for the evening.

2. Do not expose your children to a series of casual dating partners. It can be very confusing and distressing to children to see their parent going out with a variety of dating partners, particularly if they are still grieving because of the divorce.
3. When a relationship does become significant, gradually work this person into your children's life. Provide some relaxed opportunities for your children and your significant other to become acquainted by planning some enjoyable activities together, such as visiting the zoo, seeing a sports event, going to the movies, etc. Be aware, however, that if your children do develop an affectionate relationship with someone you do not intend to marry, they may be required to cope with another loss when that relationship ends.
4. *Never* engage in sexual activities with a dating partner (casual or serious) in your home when your children are present anywhere in the home—even if they are sleeping in their bedrooms and you are behind a locked door in your bedroom. Participating in sexual activities with a dating partner anyplace where your children are in close proximity could be distressing and psychologically harmful to them. Furthermore, legally, your custody of your children could be in jeopardy if you are the custodial parent, or your current visitation privileges could be endangered if you are the noncustodial parent.
5. When you decide to remarry, tell your children about your plans well in advance, so they can have time to discuss and adjust to the changes that your remarriage will create in their lives.
6. Tell your children privately about your plans for remarriage (without your significant other present) so they can be open about any questions or concerns they may have about their prospective stepparent. It is important to take your children's feelings about a potential spouse into consideration. However, you should not allow your children to veto your choice of a marital partner or to select their own marital candidate for you.
7. Do not make a decision to marry someone *only* because you feel this person would be an excellent stepparent for your children. When you remarry, it is in your children's best interest for you to be happily remarried. This is not likely unless you marry someone that you love and with whom you wish to share your life.

8. If it is feasible, consider moving to a different residence after remarriage rather than having one spouse move into the current residence of the other. The remarriage will create many changes in household life and routine. Adjustment usually is easier in a new environment, rather than simply plugging a new spouse into the other's "territory" and then trying to make the needed and desired alterations to household life and routine.
9. Before remarriage, it is important for the natural parent and future stepparent to discuss in depth their childrearing philosophy and their feelings and expectations about household rules. Agreement needs to be reached about these issues through discussion and compromise. Two natural parents who are married to one another frequently disagree about childrearing issues, even though they have parented their children together since birth. The potential for disagreement about childrearing issues is much greater between a natural parent and a stepparent because they lack the common history since the children's birth. It is advisable to address these issues and to decide how to resolve areas of disagreement before the remarriage takes place.
10. Another matter which is advisable to resolve before remarriage concerns areas of responsibility for decision making which will be delegated to her, which to him, and which will be discussed and then mutually agreed upon. A specific issue, which typically creates many problems between the natural parent and stepparent, is the disciplinary role and action to be taken by the stepparent. General agreement about the future disciplinary roles should be reached before remarriage whenever possible.
11. Be honest with yourself about your future spouse's interest or disinterest as assuming an active and enthusiastic role as a stepparent to your children. If the person you wish to marry has little interest in involving himself/herself in raising your children, do not proceed with the remarriage *unless* you are willing to accept this situation without resentment.

GUIDELINES AFTER REMARRIAGE

1. Recognize that many children whose parents are divorced have fantasies that their parents will reconcile and remarry one another. In these cases, when a parent remarries someone else, this can be very disappointing to the child and can create resentment toward both the parent who has remarried and the new stepparent. Many children refuse to abandon their parental remarriage fantasies, even after their parents have married other people. Instead, they resent their new stepparent and may consciously or unconsciously try to sabotage the new marriage through acting out and being unpleasant to their new stepparent.
2. Usually the younger children are when their parent remarries, the more easily they will adjust to the remarriage and to their new stepparent. When babies or toddlers are involved, the transition tends to be relatively uncomplicated.

However, when children are in adolescence, the adjustment tends to be the most complicated and difficult for all concerned.

3. Do not expect “instant love” to take place between children and their new stepparent. Because two people love one another and marry does not mean that the new stepparent and stepchildren will necessarily love one another immediately. It usually takes time for love to develop in step relationships, and sometimes stepparents and their stepchildren never develop love for one another. However, there should be an expectation and an insistence upon courtesy and respect for one another. Hopefully, over time this will serve as a basis for liking and love to develop.
4. Never insist that your children call their stepparent “Mom” or “Dad”. Allow your children to decide what name or term they wish to use. They might elect to call the stepparent by his/her first name or by a nickname.
5. It is especially important that the stepparent and natural parent agree upon the disciplinary role to be assumed by the stepparent. However, it must be stressed that in most cases stepparents should not assume a disciplinary role with their stepchildren immediately after the remarriage. Instead, they should work to establish a warm and close relationship in the role of a friend before assuming responsibility for disciplining the children. This often requires between eighteen and twenty-four months when the stepchildren are adolescents. However, when the stepchildren are toddlers, disciplinary responsibility often can be appropriately assumed by stepparents within a few weeks. In the interim, the natural parent should continue his/her disciplinary role, and the stepparent simply should be subtly supportive. Any disciplinary suggestions which the stepparent has for the natural parent generally should be discussed privately, rather than in the presence of the children.
6. Realistic household rules and behavioral guidelines for children should be established and consistently enforced. Children need to know what is expected of them and that they will be compelled to observe these limits. It is very important that there is consistency between the parent and the stepparent regarding household rules and behavioral expectations. A “united front” must be presented even when the marital couple privately disagrees. Children whose parents have divorced often have become masters at the “divide-and-conquer” game, and they will continue playing this game whenever possible in the stepfamily.
7. Household rules and behavioral guidelines in your household may be significantly different from those which exist in the home of your children’s other parent. This can create difficulties for the children since they must adjust to two different sets of rules, one in the custodial home and another during visitation. The parent whose rules are more lenient and/or flexible usually receives few complaints from the children. However, the parent whose rules are most strict

and demanding frequently receives complaints and hears many negative comments about living conditions in his/her household compared to the other parent's household. If you are satisfied that your household rules are fair and appropriate for your home, it is best simply to tell your children, "This is the way we do things in this household. When you are in your other parent's household, he/she makes the rules and you are expected to follow them while you are there."

8. Never tell the children that you don't like them to spend time with their other natural parent or stepparent. Unless this person is so violent or psychologically disturbed that he/she presents a serious threat to your children, try to encourage their relationship with him/her. It is in your children's best interest to feel loved by and close to both parents and to develop a positive relationship with their other parent's spouse.
9. Do not try to replace your children's natural parent with their stepparent (your current spouse). Even if your children's other parent displays little interest in continuing his/her relationship with them, communicate very clearly to your children that this is not their fault and that this has not happened because the children have been bad. Do not give your children false hope that the other parent will resume an appropriate parenting role soon if this is unlikely. It usually is best to tell children that their other parent seems to be troubled and that you hope the situation eventually will change. In other words, leave the door open for the relationship to be re-established in the future.
10. Villainizing your children's other parent to them is not in your children's best interest nor is it in your best interest with respect to your relationship with your children. Do not tell your children bad things about their other parent. Be very careful how you talk about your ex-spouse—both to your children and in their presence. It is very important for your children's well being to have as positive an image of both their natural parents as possible. Pointing out the flaws of your ex-spouse to your children is not only detrimental to your children, but it frequently backfires in later years and results in their resentment toward you. Children will become appropriately aware of parental flaws themselves as they mature.
11. Do not criticize the spouse or significant other of your children's other parent to your children. This only creates discomfort for your children and creates problems for them when they are with their other parent.
12. Request relatives and close friends not to say negative things to your children about you, your spouse, their other parent, or the spouse or significant other of their other parent.
13. Sometimes parents spend much more time with their children than they did before the divorce. However, after remarriage, there is less time available for the children because of time devoted to the new marital relationship. It is important

that the natural parent and, whenever possible, the stepparent devote a few minutes of quality time to each child every day.

14. Never make your children feel as though they must choose between their parents. This places them in a double-bind situation and results in guilt and a painful conflict of loyalties.
15. Never ask your children to be messengers to their other parent for you. Contact the other person yourself, either by phone or by note. Using children to deliver messages, *especially* if the message to the other parent is unpleasant (such as, “Tell your father I’m sick and tired of his being late with your child support check” or “Tell your stepmother to use better judgment in packing your suitcase next visit.”) is a serious mistake in judgment.
16. Never fight with your children’s other parent or the spouse of this parent in front of the children. In addition to the immediate pain and discomfort, in the long term the most disturbed children of divorce are those who have been directly exposed to parental warfare.
17. Never fight with your current spouse in front of the children. In addition to the immediate distress created by exposure to the conflict, if your children have developed a close, loving relationship with their stepparent, this causes fear and anxiety that this marriage, too, will end in divorce. On the other hand, if your children have resentment toward their stepparent and/or have a fantasy about you reuniting with their other parent, this can help create false hopes that you may divorce your current spouse and remarry their other parent.
18. Never threaten to make the children live with their other parent. This decision should be made only on the basis of the best interest of your children. It should not be regarded as a potential punishment by you or by them.
19. Work toward regarding your ex-spouse not primarily as your ex-spouse but as the other parent of your children.
20. Do not ask your children to tell you what is going on in their other parent’s life. This puts your children into a terrible double bind position of feeling disloyal to the other parent if they respond or feeling disloyal to you if they do not.
21. Do not ask your children *not* to tell some things to their other parent. This creates discomfort because of the conflict in parental loyalties.
22. It is important that the natural parent and stepparent be committed to meeting their obligations to the children. However, if one or both of the marital partners *always* puts the children first, the marital relationship will suffer and ultimately the marriage will become weakened and may eventually end in divorce—which is *not* in the best interest of the children. In order to provide a stable home and

positive marital role models for the children, it is essential that the remarried couple meet their couple needs and make their marital relationship primary. By developing an affectionately close and harmonious marriage relationship, the foundation for a healthy, well adjusted family is created—which certainly *is* in the best interest of the children.

GUIDELINES SPECIFICALLY FOR NON-CUSTODIAL PARENTS

1. Do not get involved in arguments with your ex-spouse or his/her significant other when you pick up the children for visitation. The distress of watching their parents or stepparents at war and hearing angry words and/or seeing a parent in tears does not set the stage for a pleasant weekend of visitation for you or your children. If this becomes a pattern, your children will begin to dread seeing you arrive, even though they love you and want to spend time with you.
2. Work with the custodial parent to establish a pattern of communication with your children between visitation. Prearranged telephone conversations are recommended because, if you work out convenient times in advance with your children (i.e., Tuesday and Thursday evenings at 8:00 p.m.), they will be there and can answer the phone themselves. If your children are the initiators of the pre-arranged calls, you will be available to answer the telephone when they call. This way of handling regular telephone contact eliminates unnecessary and perhaps uncomfortable contact with you ex-spouse each time you call to talk with your children; enables you to keep in touch with you children between visitation which encourages more closeness; and it sends an important message to your children that, although you no longer live with them, you do not forget about them during the week and want to be close to them.
3. Do not try to compensate for your guilt about not being with your children full time by refusing to discipline or to give responsibilities to them. Assign regular responsibilities to them while they are visiting; and make sure they do them. No matter how much they complain, they will appreciate it later.
4. Do not pack the *whole* time your children are with you with “fun” activities with little or no time for closeness or discussion.
5. Do things together often when your children are with you. If the parent whom the children are visiting simply continues his/her own routine and the children do their own thing, visitation becomes a rather empty ritual. Balance is necessary between attempting to plan “Disneyland” weekends and between simply going about the normal routine, allowing the children to structure all of their own time. It is essential for you to devote some special attention to your children and to let them know how important they continue to be to you, even though you no longer live with them.

6. Take both the children's interests and your own interests into consideration when planning activities. Plan activities that are mutually enjoyable and/or alternate your favorites with theirs.
7. Ask your children what special things they would like to do when they are with you. Make suggestions to them to give them creative ideas (learning a new skill together, reading books aloud; working on a project together, such as putting together a model airplane or a puzzle, putting in a small garden, sewing a garment, etc.).
8. Whenever your children are with you, it is important to set aside some quality time to be alone with *each* child.
9. Try not to be too sensitive if your children sometimes wish to attend activities, which are especially important to them, which infringe on your visitation time with them. If you become angry, or act hurt or resentful, you may discourage your children from considering activities, which interfere with their visitation with you. However, rather than creating more closeness between you and your children, this probably will cause resentment toward you. A more constructive response to situations is to offer to take your children to such activities, pick them up after the activity, and to talk about it together on the way home.
10. Do not attempt to buy your children. Extravagant gifts are no substitute for love and some quality time together. In addition, they send the message that love can be bartered for "things" and that "things" are symbolic of love. In addition to being detrimental to your relationship to your children, it sets them up for a pattern of destructive relationships in the future.
11. Never forget your children on holidays or on their birthday. Whenever humanly possible, be on time to pick up your children for visitation and be on time to make pre-arranged telephone calls to them. Put these important matters on your appointment calendar in big letters. When you are habitually late for visitation or prearranged telephone calls, or forget special occasions, your children interpret this as evidence that they aren't an important part of your life anymore. This kind of hurt creates a wound that is difficult to heal.
12. Try to remain involved in your children's day-to-day life even though they no longer live with you all the time. Inquire frequently about their current and planned school and social activities. Then remember to follow up later (i.e., ask whether the science exam was as difficult as expected or whether the school field trip to the museum was interesting).
13. At all times, remember that the best interests of your children must come before your own personal interests, your anger at your ex-spouse and any desire you may have for revenge.

14. Provide empty space in a closet and a dresser or chest that is reserved for each visiting child in which he/she can store personal belongings.
15. If you have remarried and your stepchildren live in your household, your children may feel competitive with your stepchildren and be jealous of the time you spend with them. Your children may need special reassurance of your love for them, your pleasure in being with them, and your desire to spend as much time with them as possible.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STEPSIBLINGS

1. The first rule to follow in facilitating good relationships between step-siblings is to *be fair*, both in enforcing household rules and behavioral rules and in dispensing discipline or privileges and rewards. It is not abnormal or inappropriate for you to love your natural children more than your stepchildren. However, it is crucial to your relationship with your stepchildren and to the relationship between the stepsiblings that you not show favoritism to your natural children.
2. Be sensitive to the amount of change created in a child's life when stepsiblings are acquired. Be sure that all children have some space that they can call their own and that their private property is respected by others. It may be necessary to furnish each child with a foot locker and a combination lock if some children are unable to resist using or playing with the belongings of others.
3. Adolescent stepsiblings may be sexually attracted to one another. It is important that household guidelines be developed to prevent them from acting on this attraction (rules against walking around the house in under-wear, requirements for knocking before entering a stepsibling's room, etc.) since the incest taboo may be weak in stepsibling relationships—especially if the children were adolescents when the parental remarriage occurred.
4. Some stepsibling rivalry is normal, but it is up to the natural parent and stepparent to defuse it as much as possible.

CHILDREN BORN TO THE REMARRIED COUPLE

1. The birth of the new baby can improve and strengthen the relationship between stepsiblings, since all of them are equally related to the new half-sister or half-brother.
2. The birth of a new baby in a stepfamily also can be a source of jealousy and insecurity in stepsiblings if they believe that this baby will be more valued by their

natural parent as well as their stepparent because he/she is related by blood to both of them.

3. When a baby is expected in the stepfamily, it is important to alleviate the concerns that children from former marriages may have that they are being replaced and/or that the new baby will be loved more than they. A baby born into the stepfamily can be a unifying force, but only if the older half siblings are positively prepared for the arrival of the baby and are made to feel loved and secure of their place in the family.
4. Having a baby together can be a source of great joy and fulfillment and can strengthen a marriage—and the stepfamily as well—*only* if:
 - a. *Both* marital partners want to have a baby.
 - b. Another child will not place too much financial strain on the family.
 - c. There is enough time and energy to raise another child, in addition to already existing children.
 - d. The decision to have a baby together is not an attempt to save a shaky marriage. Before deciding to have a baby the remarried couple needs to have a solid marriage and a stepfamily that is operating relatively smoothly.

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